

The Self-aggrandizement Disguised As Self-flagellation  
As Even Higher Art Form Aspect:  
Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*

by Marina Guiomar

*The first 200 readers of this book who write with proof that they have read and absorbed the many lessons herein will each receive a check, from the author, for \$5.*  
Dave Eggers

*This lead me to the idea that the ones who had survived had made some sort of clean break.*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald

My relationship with autobiography comes a long way but little did I know that until very recently. My denial had to do with the need to do away with anything that related, even faintly, to the autobiographical critical tradition. Only after its demise could I further the reading of the texts I was interested in, and could I see beyond the idea that those works were more than 'witnessings by himself about himself and evidence of the impassioned new disquiet of modern man, fierce to elucidate the mystery of his own personality' (Gusdorf, 1980: 33). Perhaps true and interesting, this idea seemed too prescriptive, and, paradoxically enough, too vague, of the texts I wanted to interpret, the memoir-like novels of Blaise Cendrars. So I did a clean break, and I began to read the texts I cared for as freely as I wanted. I could therefore address topics as dear to me as representation and mimesis, criticism and artistry, criticism and biography, transnationalism, and reception. Without ever touching upon autobiography: we don't call it that anymore.

Then came Dave Eggers. And I fully embraced autobiography and started to wonder why. It could not have been because *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (A.H.W.O.S.G., 2001) was about the sudden death of Eggers' parents, to cancer, within a timeframe of 32 days. It could not have been because Eggers was then made guardian of his younger brother Toph (eight at the time, Eggers in his early

twenties) and they set out to the Bay Area, looking for their clean break, leaving the conservative Chicago suburbs behind; it could not have been because Eggers' sister Beth committed suicide shortly after the publication of the volume. It could not have been the title of the book; the copyright page; the acknowledgements. But I was now officially into autobiography – even if we don't call it that anymore.

So 'autobiography' is uncalled for these days. In fact, both authors and readers of autobiographical works tend to object to the term. Furthermore, not only do we not call a text autobiographical anymore, we do not like to admit we write or read or write upon autobiography anymore. The opposite is also true: everyone is nonetheless doing it. This essay is an attempt to grasp why autobiography is the boogeyman of literary studies. Why do moral standards tend to preside over the aesthetic in the case of autobiography, and should they? Is autobiography's limitlessness a precondition for its inscrutable stance? What is reach of the institution *autobiography* in contemporary culture?

The idea that art should be free from necessity and natural contingency goes back to Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the philosopher claims that: 'art is concerned neither with things which exist or come into being by necessity, nor with things produced by nature: these have their source of motion within themselves' (Aristotle, 1962: 152). The notion that art, through mimesis, is free from strict referentiality and causality founds the kernel of aesthetics, up to the present day. This is perhaps why biography, autobiography and, say, travel literature (all extremely dependent to a greater degree on the authenticity of their cartographies) tend historically to be perceived as a lower form of literary discourse, as opposed to the fictional or poetic modes. As far as autobiography is concerned, it rapidly became a matter of giving authentic first-person accounts and staying true to the readers, who also knew how to position themselves before the essentially referential narratives<sup>1</sup>. The dispute fact vs. fiction made room for the precedence of morals over aesthetics but, as I see it, the question is poorly posed.

*Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood (Bruckstücke)*, by Bruno Dössekker (aka Benjamin Wilkomirski, 1995) describes the infancy of the author in a concentration camp. The untruthful story was unmasked and considered a fraud three years after its publication. Up until then, the autobiographical novel had been considered an accomplished artistic work (it was morally valid, as it was perceived to be true). As soon as the fraud was unveiled, the text was no longer seen as a

masterpiece, and it irremediably fell into the category of *Kitsch*. It is strange, but not surprising, that moral standards preside over aesthetic judgments. That the book was an award winner that then fell into oblivion and censorship, as it were, is a mystery to me. My suggestion is that it has probably been pedestrian from the get go and that the reception judged it poorly in the first place, based on complacency and guilt, while at the same time driven by a powerful commercial and publicizing machinery. But the case still leaves questions unanswered, and I would like to come back to those later.

Not knowing much about autobiography, I wish to state what I do know about it. I know that it is not a literary genre; that it does not incorporate peculiar characteristics; that it is not different in essence from a poem, a play or a novel. I also perceive it as the touchstone of literacy, thought, and education – as a mirror of democratization, in a word. If we think of Rousseau's *Confessions*, autobiography has been invested with the ability to bring the life story of a bourgeois man to the masses, a practice that has been repeated and made common to this day, to the extent that we bestow talent and virtuosity to a man whose two parents died with cancer. Autobiography presents variations in degree, not in species, of such features as first-person narration or the description of personal accounts, but not even these can be taken for granted (for instance, Eggers uses the third-person narrator in his autobiographical work several times). Therefore, autobiography is still uncharted territory, despite all that has been written about it and all the different terminological formulations it has undergone. It should be interesting to recover the word autobiography once more and question some of its deep-seated premises. It should also be productive to consider the reception of autobiography and grasp how it deals with both its aesthetic and extra-aesthetic (moral, legal, cultural) elements. The following pages will try to elucidate some of these aspects.

James Olney set for himself the task of describing the *status quo* of autobiography in the year 1980, having devoted the previous decade and a half to the study of the 'genre'. The essay 'Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction' is a revisionist attempt at pinpointing autobiography's ultimate limits and conditions but also at clarifying the reason why the 'cultural moment' favors, like never before, the rise of academic interest upon autobiographical discourse. Olney outlines the models, the history, and the bibliographic key-moments concerning autobiography, making clear that not all critics are apt to fathom the inscrutabilities of first-person narrations<sup>2</sup>. By means of

deconstructing the word ‘autobiography’ into its three Greek elements (*autos*, *bios*, *graphē*), Olney describes the general tendency for critics to privilege the *bios* part, rather than the *autos* part (the one directly concerning to the self). Olney sees ‘the act of autobiography [as] at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self’, and the author therefore discards as incoherent any approaches that prioritize the other two elements (Olney, 1980: 19). On the one hand, if one highlights *bios*, one risks fallacy (such is the case of psychoanalytic, gender-based, postcolonial readings, for example, according to Olney)<sup>3</sup>; on the other hand, if a critic emphasizes *graphē*, the act of writing proper, s/he is conjuring up the end of the authoritative self, hence autobiography, by defending that the authorial instance is yet another textual element, a non-referential entity that can be ‘deconstructed’ as rhetorical artifices, characters and plots<sup>4</sup>. This corollary does not disarm Olney, who nimbly turns the ‘crux of the matter’ into his favor: the reason for the appeal of autobiography in the academic context is precisely ‘a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries and, accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self’ (Olney, 1980: 22, 23).

But Olney, as sure as he is of the limits and conditions of autobiography, also adds a disclaimer to his reflections. The critic never misses the chance to appeal to autobiography’s incompleteness, fleetness, and elusiveness<sup>5</sup>. The need for adopting such a normative standpoint aims not only at hindering the ‘limitless’ character of autobiography, but especially at aggrandizing the work of the critic proper. Olney witnesses first-hand the anxieties of a secure institution (that of literary criticism, not autobiography), and he therefore tries to reorganize tradition and the canon of autobiographical criticism. By becoming the spokesman for an elusive, yet ‘solidly established literary genre’ (composed of works by male, white, bourgeois authors, from Augustine to Rousseau, from Montaigne to Henry James), and by auto-proclaiming himself the only reader capable of tackling the endeavor, the critic bestows authority onto his day-job, while delaying the onset of other proposals (Gusdorf, 1980: 28). The critic’s viewpoint has indeed set a tradition, and autobiography is only now starting to be grasped beyond elusiveness and incompleteness.

In the acknowledgements section of *A.H.W.O.S.G.*, the author shows recognition of a number of people (including ‘NASA and the United States Marine Corps’) who have added, in one way or the other, to the progression of the book. Among the acknowledged are the author’s siblings Toph and Beth (‘Bill is not being

singled out because he is a Republican'), and everyone who has authorized the inclusion of their real names and actions into the story (Eggers, 2001: xxi). The usually brief and conventional acknowledgements segment is nevertheless, in Eggers' case, expanded into a 24-page long text, and the noun 'acknowledgements' develops into the verb 'to acknowledge', thus assuming the meaning 'to admit, to recognize'. The spatial expansion and morphologic conversion grant the author with the occasion to say one or two things about the text he has written. He therefore takes the opportunity to digress upon the title of the book, its major aspects (one of them being the title of this paper), its chief rhetorical devices, and its author's revenues. The author also seizes the moment and does his own 'interpretive glasnost' about 'memoir-sorts of books' and 'writing about actual events' (Eggers, 2001: xliii, xxi, xxii). The word autobiography is never used in the book: we don't call it that anymore.

It is not only the word autobiography that is repudiated in the Eggers' text; 'the idea of relating a true story' is rebutted as well (Eggers, 2001: xxiii). The author in fact concedes that 'such books, about real things and real people [...] are inherently vile and corrupt and wrong and evil and bad'. They make people (authors and readers) uncomfortable and the only way to assuage the uneasiness is by doing 'what the author should have done, and what authors and readers have been doing since the beginning of time: Pretend It's Fiction' (Eggers, 2001: xxi, xxiii). To pretend that autobiographical accounts are 'fiction', 'or style'<sup>6</sup>, or 'rhetoric'<sup>7</sup> suspends any ethic or moral preoccupations for a while, and acknowledges that autobiography encloses more than a linear distinction between what is factual and what is false, what is anthropological/historical and what is literary. This notion points in the direction of, say, Paul de Man's deconstructive approach to autobiography by means of the trope prosopopoeia. While reasserting that autobiography is not dead, that it is rather 'a figure of reading or understanding' common to all texts in different degrees, and not at all a fixed genre, de Man invokes prosopopoeia in order to explain how tropological substitutions are at the root of autobiographical discourse, namely Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (Paul de Man, 1984: 70). But I leave de Man for another time, and concentrate on Eggers. The author states, in the acknowledgements section, that 'revelation' (another term for autobiography) is 'fossil fuel', in the sense that it is 'endlessly renewable, usable without diminishing one's capacity to create more' (Eggers, 2001: xxxv). The metaphor used in the description of autobiography is

remarkable from a rhetorical point of view: the cleft between the tenor and the vehicle is so great that it enhances the desired effect of surprise. Moreover, it reverberates in the proposal 'Pretend It's Fiction', and it allows for the author to acknowledge that he indeed goes through his experiences repeatedly, in writing, and that he interprets them differently every time. The trope therefore enhances a feature that is absolutely crucial in literature at large and in autobiography: renewing.

When Olney asserts that 'there are no rules or formal requirements binding the prospective autobiographer – no restraints, no necessary models, no obligatory observances gradually shaped out of a long developing tradition', the critic is pervasively affirming his own theories: a) that autobiography is a genre on its own, with no *rapport* to other genres; b) that autobiography focuses solely on the self, on the 'individual talent who would translate a life into writing'; c) that the rhetorical mechanisms that make up the autobiographical text are important only insofar as they do not overshadow the self; d) that the more dispersed and 'rarified' autobiography is, the more authoritative becomes the work of the assembling critic (Olney, 1980: 3-4). On the contrary, if we pay closer attention to Eggers' perceptions (that autobiography can be read as a fictional work, and that autobiography is a ceaseless renewing process), we shall be in good company. When writing 'The Crack-Up', the autobiographical account published threefold (from February through April, 1936) on the *Esquire*, F. S. Fitzgerald shares with the readers the different stages of his nervous breakdown. During the agonizing phase, Fitzgerald felt he was lacking everything, including the 'background of the Euganean Hills to give it color' (Fitzgerald, 2013: 4). The Euganean Hills are an explicit reference to P. Shelley's 'Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills', the poem from 1818, and the allusion is the way found by Fitzgerald to report to the reassuring gaze of canonic tradition (further ahead in his text, Fitzgerald will invoke the 'Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition'). It is a claim in favor of the renewable conditions of autobiography, and literature in general: in the act of appropriation of Shelley's, the 'Euganean Hills' are reused without limitations of genre or loss of rhetorical power.

But renewing is not always as clean. While describing his nervous collapse, Fitzgerald recalls the newly discovered soothing effect of lists: 'Trying resolutely not to think – instead I made lists – made lists and tore them up, hundreds of lists: of cavalry leaders and football players and cities, and popular tunes and pitchers, and happy times, and hobbies and houses lived in and how many suits since I left the army

[...]' (Fitzgerald, 2013: 2). Lists are also present in the Eggers' book. The acknowledgements section counts two lists (of the major themes of the text), one diagram (of the deaths), and a chart (of the author's overall turnovers and expenses). I suggest we focus on the following list, towards the end of the volume: 'A list of things I want to do while here [in Chicago, looking for the whereabouts of his parents' remains]. In the interest of overload, I've continued, on the plane, in bed, to add to the list, tangential or random things [...] wanting to throw anything potentially provocative or brutal into the mess'<sup>8</sup> (Eggers, 2001: 359-360). The palliative effect of list making is revealed to and shared by the two ailing authors. Recording disparate items onto a sheet of paper grants the much needed obliviousness and detachment to both Fitzgerald and Eggers. But the project is not an innocent one: by writing 'Crack-Up', Fitzgerald is purposefully adding his name to a long list of autobiographers; Eggers is, in his turn, fabricating his own literary genealogy, a genealogy that descends directly from Fitzgerald's and the whole lineage of Great American Novel writers<sup>9</sup>. Eggers reutilizes the fossil fuel he was given, inscribing thus his name in the canonic tradition, and turning the renewable energy into his own material, his own perception, therefore adding another layer of complexity to his autobiographical work. I propose we look into yet one of those layers.

*A.H.W.O.S.G.* begins with a moving description of the last days of illness and resulting death of the author's mother, prey to stomach cancer. When I first read Eggers' description, I could not help thinking of *Memoires pour Paul de Man* and *Circumfession* by Jacques Derrida, and the therein multiple references to the death of Derrida's mother<sup>10</sup>. In fact, and if we suspend for a while any sort of genre constraints, as I have gradually been trying to do, all the way to impurity, we arrive at this very deconstructive ground where texts form, not a dynastic relation among themselves, but a stream of correspondences and citations. The case of autobiography is particularly paradigmatic of this movement of contamination, both between texts and genres, for its presence is germane to the majority of the critical and philosophical essays of the 'indeterminacy' register. The interference of one's life into one's work is a sign that, for Derrida, autobiography needs to be questioned, pushed to its limits, and restructured. Such a reformulation encompasses different elaborations: one, for instance, revolves around the role of the signature or autograph; the other has to do with the utilization of the exergue (a space on a coin, token, or medal, usually on the reverse below the central part of the design, that often gives the date and place of

engraving). Placed between the title and preface, and the text proper, the literary 'exergue' connects the discourse and accentuates the ubiquitous character of autobiography, since it plays with both citation and authorship. The exergue has not been left out from *A.H.W.O.S.G.*; rather, we read: 'This Was Uncalled For.' The phrase, which in its ambiguity evokes the indulgence of the autobiographic tone and the pointless death of the two parents, inaugurates the impurity of the text hereafter, and the pervasive presence of autobiographical features.

The derridean concept of the exergue is also present in *A.H.W.O.S.G.* via other instances. The epigraph is not quite an exergue and Eggers seems to know this, for the author requests, in the 'Preface to This Edition', that 'all previous epigraphs [...] be removed, as he never really saw himself as the type of person who would use epigraphs'. Inversely, the copyright page can be taken as an exergue, since it literally gives us the date and time of 'engraving' of the text. In the case of the copyright page of the volume by Eggers, the unrestricted occupation of the entire page is exemplary of the permeating presence of autobiography throughout. If one reads the copyright page, which no one ever does, one will learn, alongside the Library of Congress Catalog Card Number, the body measurements, the main physical traits, and the allergies of Dave Eggers. One will also note a disclaimer in small print: 'This is a work of fiction, only in that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people, and exact descriptions of certain things, so had to fill in gaps as best he could'. This disclaimer is completely opposite from the one set forth by Olney, in the sense that it acknowledges the imperceptibility of the boundaries of the 'genre'; contamination between fiction and reality, series of texts, and genres governs from beginning to end. Even the horizontality of the page can, sometimes, be challenged (such is the case of page xli) or its verbalism (as in page xlv, where the reader comes across the 'drawing of a stapler'). The 'paradox' with which the prescriptive critic would characterize autobiography, and which would then justify the excess of technicality and normativity, is a given in Eggers (Olney, 1980: 3). The 'paradox', the disclaimer, and the demand for 'interpretive glasnost' become objects of parody by the author. Eggers incorporates the three elements within the volume and claims his anti-theoretical stand. The permeation of autobiography (and autobiographical criticism, as it were) takes not only the space of the narrative proper, but it occupies the entire book, from the exergue to the copyright page, from the preface to the acknowledgements. The same permeation privileges a reflexive (thus



critical) look upon the mechanisms conjured up in the making of autobiography, such as the recurrent exposure of rhetorical devices ('the author would like to save you some trouble by laying out a rough guide to a little over half of the metaphors in the book', Eggers, 2001: xliii), and the hyperbolic concern with the self-conscious, the self-explanatory, and the solipsistic gimmickry of the literary craft<sup>11</sup>.

As far as autobiographical criticism goes, I have already set forth how the normative criticism has led to a resistance to autobiography, at least to most of its terminological and immediate aspects. Conversely, as much as I find the poststructuralist discourse uneven at times, the standpoints of Derrida and Paul de Man were fundamental to the re-thinking and the re-positioning in academia of autobiography. In the case of the Eggers' volume, the deconstructionist stance is taken one step further, in the sense that the concomitant pervasiveness of autobiography and its proved inexistence (as seen, the term itself is never mentioned) suggests another way of dealing with such a resistance. It is as if autobiography diluted itself into nothingness by means of contamination, limitlessness, loss of genre and terminological restrictions. But at the same time the dissolve occurs, there seems always to exist as well a movement towards the extrapolating the borders of the book proper.

In *A.H.W.O.S.G.*, the author describes how the editorial board of *Might*, the small San Francisco bimonthly journal edited by the young Eggers, thinks of inviting a celebrity to be the protagonist of an 'elaborate hoax': the nation-wide luminary would fake his/her own death and make the cover and a spread of a 1996 *Might* issue. Adam Rich (once known as 'America's little brother' for he had been the child-actor of the TV show *Eight is Enough*) is the celebrity who accepts the provocation, based on the following pitching: 'We explain that it'll be this elaborate hoax, that it'll be serving a higher purpose, that of satirizing the media's interest in celebrity death, parodying their eulogies, that this will make national news, and that outside of the feeling food he'll be able to do as a result of his role in providing this educational service to a needy America, everyone will think he's bleeding edge for even associating with us' (Eggers, 2001: 314). The death is concocted thus: 'We settle on his being killed by an unemployed dinner theater stagehand in the parking lot of the Asp Club, a fabulous Los Angeles nightspot. He likes that, a violent death, and better yet, at a location that makes clear that even hours before a sudden and bloody death, the guy new how to party' (Eggers, 2001: 332). The scheme begins to be exposed

only eight minutes after the issuing of *Might*'s press release concerning the premature demise of the actor, because all the bigger periodicals start questioning the lack of evidence from *Might*. The prophylactic aim of the deed is rapidly dismantled, while the consequences of the act would linger for weeks in the actor's life (or death): 'It was over. Or not. Not for Adam, for the machinery had been set in motion, and it would be a few weeks before it would slow. [...] It was all over the Internet. People debated it in chatrooms; most of those who knew it was fake were furious. Most people weren't sure. Adam's friends spent days in shock, believing he was gone. One girlfriend, assuming he was dead, called his home number, just to hear his voice on the answering machine one last time. Adam picked up. She swooned' (Eggers, 2001: 348).

The pretense death of Adam Rich is paradigmatic of yet another way of looking into autobiography. The deceit involved not only the readers of *A.H.W.O.S.G.*, but the readers of *Might* as well, who despaired for weeks upon the reading of the false epitaph. In fact, the major difference between *Might*'s epitaph and that of Wordsworth as seen by Paul de Man, is that prosopopoeia has its limits. And the limits of a rhetorical trope end when real life begins. But things are not always this linear. A literary joke has implications in real life that cannot be dismissed as simply making part of the rhetorical or fictional realm. And one question poses itself: why do some people read differently than others?

There are limit cases worth contemplating. *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* is one example already cited. The case of *Fragments d'une femme perdue*, by Patrick Poivre d'Arvor (2009) proves to be exemplary of the interference of the reader, the reader here being a judge of the First Instance Court of Paris. Poivre d'Arvor was accused of incorporating letters exchanged between him and his ex-wife in *Fragments* and was sued for violation of privacy and plagiarism. The defense argued that the book should be considered a work of fiction (rather than an autobiographical account) but the judge of First Instance condemned the author to a 33.000-euro indemnity on the basis of the following presupposition: 'a work of fiction implies the distancing between the author and the characters' actions', a divide that, to the judge, was not explicit in the text. According to my arguments, from a theoretical perspective, the judge's decision makes no sense, but, from a legal point of view, it does make sense. It is as if autobiography were read *as* autobiography everywhere in the world except in a literature classroom.

Some limit cases concern suicide. Beth Eggers, the sister of Dave Eggers, committed suicide shortly after the publication of *A.H.W.O.S.G.* Beth accused the author of downplaying her role as a tutor for Toph and amplifying his own. She later withdrew her words saying that she had had ‘a terrible LaToya Jackson moment’<sup>12</sup> but she nevertheless committed suicide in November 2001. The way I see it, the reader Beth Eggers read the book by her brother as if it *were* autobiography, and all the characters and actions therein made a *rapport*, in her reading, to real life experiences, namely her own. She could not distance herself enough from the book and, moreover, she could not help attributing peculiar characteristics to autobiography. Strangely enough, autobiography is construed by theorists and aestheticians differently than by lawmakers and ‘common people’.

I can never seem to get past the anecdotic episode that a professor of mine used to tell the class: a deconstructionist scholar of his acquaintance was so absorbed in his undertaking that his meals consisted only of letter-noodles soup, so that his reading and imprinting could progress without interruptions. Exaggerated as this appetite may be, this is exactly how I perceive autobiography today: an ongoing project of mixed realities.

De Man, Paul (1984), ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 67-81.

Derrida, Jacques (1989), *Memoires for Paul de Man*, New York: Columbia University Press.

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Fitzgerald, F. Scott (2013), <http://www.esquire.com/features/the-crack-up>

Gusdorf, Georges (1980), ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, James Olney (org.), New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 28-48.

Olney, James (1980), ‘Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographical Introduction’, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, James Olney (org.), New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 3-27.

Starobinski, Jean (1980), 'The Style of Autobiography', *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, James Olney (org.), New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 73-83.

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<sup>1</sup> 'No one, except an electorate, likes a liar', Eggers, 2001: xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> 'In the hands of other critics, autobiography has become the focalizing literature for various "studies" that otherwise have little by way of a defining, organizing center to them. I have in mind such "studies" as American Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and African Studies. [...] I would suggest that this special quality of autobiography – that is, that autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and the vision of a people, which is the same experience and the same vision lying behind and informing all the literature of that people – is one of the reasons why autobiography has lately become such a popular, even fashionable, study in the academic world where traditional ways of organizing literature by period or school have tended to give way to a different sort of organization (or disorganization)', Olney, 1980: 13.

<sup>3</sup> 'For those critics who took *autos* for their primary focus tended to be very free in their understanding of *bios*, seeing it as the entire life of the individual up to the time of writing, the psychic configuration of the individual at the moment of writing, the whole history of a people living in this individual autobiographer, or any combination of these and various other possible senses of *bios*', Olney, 1980: 19.

<sup>4</sup> 'The text takes on a life on its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author. The self, then, is a fiction and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an "autobiography": all that is left are characters on a page, and they too can be "deconstructed" to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their existence. Having dissolved the self into a text and then out of the text into thin air, several critics (with the *hubris* peculiar to modern criticism?) have announced the end of autobiography', Olney, 1980: 22.

<sup>5</sup> 'Autobiography is both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest. [...] But if autobiography is the least complicated of writing performances, it is also the most elusive of literary documents', Olney, 1980: 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. 'The Style of Autobiography', Jean Starobinski.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. 'Autobiography as De-Facement', Paul de Man: while at the same time proposing that autobiography is not dead: it simply is not a genre at all but 'a figure of reading or understanding' that ...

<sup>8</sup> 'The idea, I suppose, is the emotional equivalent of a drug binge, the tossing together of as much disparate and presumably incompatible stimuli as possible, in a short span, five days, together constituting a sort of socio-familial archaeological bender', Eggers, 2013, 359.

<sup>9</sup> The same can of course be said about Nick Hornby's listing mania in *High Fidelity* (1995) and Nanni Moretti's *Aprile* (1998). The latter was not aspiring at writing the Great American Novel.

<sup>10</sup> I also think of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1984), and of the contemplative, intimate tone of the remembrances of Barthes' mother.

<sup>11</sup> 'While the author is self-conscious about being self-referential, he is also knowing about that self-conscious self-referentiality. [...] Further, he is fully cognizant, way ahead of you, in terms of knowing about and fully admitting the gimmickry inherent in all this, and will preempt your claim of the book's irrelevance due to said gimmickry by saying that the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding, murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story', Eggers, 2001: xxx.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/6865365/Dave-Eggers-interview-the-heartbreak-kid.html>. Last seen on 6/9/13.